

Kirsten Watson, Chief People Officer at Transport for NSW, discusses the reality of what business partnering is and how it can be achieved through business acumen, 'soft skills' and problem solving

Key Messages

- Transport's cultural aspiration is to have "Customers and the centre, People at the heart and working together for the greater good" and has a 40 year strategy and 10 year blueprint to become
- Is focused on create a place where Transport has thriving people doing meaningful work
- HR has experienced a significant shift in customer expectations over the time that Kirsten has worked in and around HR – beyond processes and into strategic alignment and advisory services. There is no genuine BAU anymore. Covid has taught us this – we need to be excellent at change and people management within the broader system.
- HR should be driven by evidence, data and problem-solving skills.
- A good HR business partner is a really great people partner which requires:
 - An interest in, and an understanding of the whole organisation, its business strategy and context. Understanding the macro picture and what success would look like in the organisation – what does the team or people need to do differently to achieve the organisation objectives. For example, the design of the organisation required to deliver business outcomes and reform outcomes.
 - Understand and be able to look across the organisation and not just focus on one area or division
 - Understand the aspiration for the culture the organisation needs to achieve – being a guardian and a coach to bring to life and guide choices. Being a courageous and influential voice when these do not align (particularly through their relationships with the leaders they are supporting).
 - Relationships built in trust and credibility with leaders – to be a sounding board.
 - Knowing when to draw on experts and specialist functions in particular areas within and across HR. Just because you're comfortable in a particular function doesn't mean you need to be the one to provide it eg recruitment.
 - Taking the time to build relationships, understand the issues and what is happening within the organisation to work with leaders and not to take a compliance approach – the 'we' approach to achieve organisational unit objectives.
- Committed to ensuring an effective operating model in HR which involves partners, centres of excellence and services/systems – to more effectively understand and pre-empt potential issues or problems

- Business partners exist to achieve business objectives. Business acumen is about understanding and measuring business outcomes – what the business needs to achieve. What is their strategic intent? What are their value drivers? How do we measure success? Are they on-track?
- Site visits are really important to talk to people about what they are doing and what their job is, what gets in the way of them doing a great job?
- Understanding operating models and organisation design is an important capability for business partners.
- Business partners need to build trust and relationships, be able to communicate well (as a peer) and can get to the problem quickly (forthright communication), not be defensive, be adaptable and comfortable with ambiguity, be prepared to test/learn and fail, strong self-regulation, self-compassion of oneself (you are not perfect – cut yourself some slack), financial acumen, negotiation skills, change management, human-centred design/co-design, organisation design as well as lean and continuous improvement skills.
- An effective people partner needs to understand the breadth of HR – get some leave cover or partner on a project to get this experience. Also requires a good understanding of the legal framework, including health and safety, as well as well-being.
- Best ways to develop these capabilities is through things like peer networks (building relationships with individuals across sector/industries in similar roles)
- Productivity is an interesting thing to measure, especially in our Covid context, and is contentious. They ask their people to indicate whether they are working at, below or above capacity and how effective are they? What can we be making easier to be more effective? There is a strong link between digitalisation and productivity – streamline with a digital mindset to make processes more predictable and efficient. Transport have been very focused on this for their customers.
- Diversity is a big focus which in some ways will never be done – 34% leadership roles held by women. Harnessing power of disruption and leaning into conversations about diversity. People partners work with the organisation in developing plans with their leaders.
- Measure your success according to the success of the unit you support

References

- Bite sized information through LinkedIn
- [TedTalks](#)
- Reading books to dive deeper (eg [Dave Ulrich](#))
- Podcasts (eg [Brene Brown](#), Caroline Taylor, [Adam Grant](#))
- Utilise corporate subscription to [Gartner](#) and [Bersin](#)
- [Lynda Gratton](#) Institute
- [Thinkers 50 seminars](#)